

Develop appropriate compliance strategies for physicians

By Jessica A. Little, CPC-FP, CPC-INTMED

Educating physicians about documentation guideline compliance is difficult. Documentation guidelines can be extremely challenging for coding educators and compliance specialists in smaller private practices. And the process can also seem daunting in group practices, where physicians must also adhere to hospital compliance guidelines.

Recognizing the guidelines to which your physicians must adhere for documentation compliance is the first step. Physicians who are part of a group practice but who also see patients in a hospital setting must follow three major sets of documentation guidelines:

- Hospital guidelines
- Physician/group practice guidelines
- Federal guidelines

When preparing educational sessions or materials for your physicians, you must consider all of the guidelines that affect them. Thoroughly review all of the guidelines and look for any discrepancies. Finding differences is much easier than finding similarities.

For example, hospital guidelines might address only the necessity of reviewing and having a signature on the electronic discharge summary that a resident dictates. However, federal and physician billing discharge service guidelines require additional steps and items. Specifically, teaching physicians must append an appropriate teaching physician attestation or link. So, when the electronic signature is present but an appropriate teaching physician attestation is missing, the teaching physician has complied with hospital standards but not with federal or physician/group practice standards. This is an example of partial compliance resulting in a service that is not billable.

Determining the tools and resources to which your physicians respond best is the next step. Is it one-on-one training? Perhaps it's a presentation in a group setting? Do they prefer handouts or something they can carry in their pockets? Try different training methods until you find what works best for them. This may seem like an inordinate amount of work for educators in larger group practices, but the payoff is enormous. Your effort is likely to result in physicians who are generally more receptive to your suggestions. This is especially true when you present your ideas in a manner or format that they request or prefer. Maintain a file of each physician's preferences. This will help you remember, and you can use it as a training tool for others in your practice.

Many physicians feel overwhelmed by the number of documentation guidelines to which they must adhere-and I don't blame them. I would feel the same way if three different entities were telling me what I must do to comply with their guidelines. Physicians probably feel as though they receive contradictory information from different compliance areas. Therefore, coders must understand this information so that they can address physicians' questions.

It has been my experience that if you do the legwork no one else has done or will do, physicians will listen to you. Demonstrate your awareness of their many responsibilities beyond treating their patients.

Helping physicians is important, so coders, educators, and compliance specialists should:

- Be friendly
- Be open to suggestions
- Research and compile the guidelines that physicians need

Be available for physician questions, and maintain open lines of communication. Although coders may have to perform some physician monitoring, a friendly and understanding attitude will be well received. The physician position is demanding, so coders should always be as helpful as possible. Strive to be perceived as someone who is willing to help and who submits claims that can survive the scrutiny of an audit.

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